

On the Jewish Problem

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Leon Trotsky

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We publish herewith four statements by Trotsky during the last years of his life expressing his views on the Jewish question. The first is in the form of an interview given to correspondents of the Jewish press upon his arrival in Mexico. The second is an excerpt from an article on "Thermidor and Anti-Semitism" written in 1937. The third is a letter which Trotsky addressed to the Jews menaced by the mounting wave of anti-semitism and fascism in the United States, calling upon them to support the revolutionary struggle of the Fourth International as the only road to their salvation. The fourth statement is from the archives of Leon Trotsky.

I

Before trying to answer your questions I ought to warn you that unfortunately I have not had the opportunity to learn the Jewish language, which moreover has been developed only since I became an adult. I have not had, and I do not have the possibility of following the Jewish press, which prevents me from giving a precise opinion on the different aspects of so important and tragic a problem. I cannot therefore claim any special authority in replying to your questions. Nevertheless I am going to try and say what I think about it.

During my youth I rather leaned toward the prognosis that the Jews of different countries would be assimilated and that the Jewish question would thus disappear in a quasi-automatic fashion. The historical development of the last quarter of a century has not confirmed this perspective. Decaying capitalism has everywhere swung over to an exacerbated nationalism, one part of which is anti-semitism. The Jewish question has loomed largest in the most highly developed capitalist country of Europe, in Germany.

On the other hand the Jews of different countries have created their press and developed the Yiddish language as an instrument adapted to modern-culture. One must therefore reckon with the fact that the Jewish nation will maintain itself for an entire epoch to come. Now the nation cannot normally exist without a common territory. Zionism springs from this very idea. But the facts of every passing day demonstrate to us that Zionism is incapable of resolving the Jewish question. The conflict between the Jews and Arabs in Palestine acquires a more and more tragic and more and more menacing character. I do not at all believe that the Jewish question can be resolved within the framework of rotting capitalism and under the control of British imperialism.

And how, you ask me, can socialism solve this question? On this point I can but offer hypotheses. Once socialism has become master of our planet or at least of its most important sections, it will have unimaginable resources in all domains. Human history has witnessed the epoch of great migrations on the basis of barbarism. Socialism will open the possibility of great migrations on the basis of the most developed technique and culture. It goes without saying that what is here involved is not compulsory displacements, that is, the creation of new ghettos for certain nationalities, but displacements freely consented to, or rather demanded by certain nationalities or parts of nationalities. The dispersed Jews who would want to be reassembled in the same community will find a sufficiently extensive and rich spot under the sun. The same

possibility will be opened for the Arabs, as for all other scattered nations. *National topography will become a part of the planned economy*. This is the grand historical perspective that I envisage. To work for international socialism means also to work for the solution of the Jewish question.

You ask me if the Jewish question still exists in the USSR. Yes, it exists, just as the Ukrainian, the Georgian, even the Russian questions exist there. The omnipotent bureaucracy stifles the development of national culture just as it does the whole of culture. Worse still, the country of the great proletarian revolution is now passing through a period of profound reaction. If the revolutionary wave revived the finest sentiments of human solidarity, the Thermidorian reaction has stirred up all that is low, dark and backward in this agglomeration of 170 million people. To reinforce its domination the bureaucracy does not even hesitate to resort in a scarcely camouflaged manner to chauvinistic tendencies, above all to anti-semitic ones. The latest Moscow trial, for example, was staged with the hardly concealed design of presenting internationalists as faithless and lawless Jews who are capable of selling themselves to the German Gestapo.

Since 1925 and above all since 1926, anti-semitic demagoguery, well camouflaged, unattackable, goes hand in hand with symbolic trials against avowed pogromists. You ask me if the old Jewish petty bourgeoisie in the USSR has been socially assimilated by the new soviet environment. I am indeed at a loss to give you a clear reply. The social and national statistics in the USSR are extremely tendentious. They do not serve to set forth the truth, but above all to glorify the leaders, the chiefs, the creators of happiness. An important part of the Jewish petty bourgeoisie has been absorbed by the formidable apparatuses of the state, industry, commerce, the cooperatives, etc., above all in their lower and middle layers. This fact engenders an anti-semitic state of feeling and the leaders manipulate it with a cunning skill in order to canalize and to direct especially against the Jews the existing discontent against the bureaucracy.

On Biro-bidjan I can give you no more than my personal evaluations. I am not acquainted with this region and still less with the conditions in which the Jews have settled there. In any case it can be no more than a very limited experience. The USSR alone would still be too poor to resolve its own Jewish question, even under a regime much more socialist than the present one. The Jewish question, I repeat, is indissolubly bound up with the complete emancipation of humanity. Everything else that is done in this domain can only be a palliative and often even a two-edged blade, as the example of Palestine shows. *January 18, 1937*

II

Some would-be "pundits" have accused me of "suddenly" raising the "Jewish question" and of intending to create some kind of ghetto for the Jews. I can only shrug my shoulders in pity. I have lived my whole life outside of Jewish circles. I have always worked in the Russian workers movement. My native tongue is Russian. Unfortunately, I have not even learned to read Jewish. The Jewish question, therefore, has never occupied the center of my attention.

But that does not mean that I have the right to be blind to the Jewish problem which exists and demands a solution. "The friends of the USSR" are satisfied with the creation of Birobidjan. I will not stop at this point to consider whether it was built on a sound foundation and what type of regime existed there (Birobidjan cannot help reflecting all the vices of bureaucratic despotism). But not a single progressive thinking individual will object to the USSR designating a special territory for those of its citizens who feel themselves to be Jews, who use the Jewish language in preference to all others, and who wish to live as a compact mass.

Is this or is this not a ghetto? During the period of Soviet democracy, of completely voluntary migration, there could be no talk of ghettos. But the Jewish question and the very manner in which settlements of Jews occurred, assumes an international aspect. Are we not correct in saying that a world socialist federation will have to make possible the creation of a Biro-bidjan for those Jews who wish to have their own autonomous republic as the arena for their own culture?

It may be presumed that a socialist democracy will not resort to compulsory assimilation. It may very well be that within two or three generations the boundaries of an independent Jewish republic, as of many other national regions, will be erased. I have neither time nor desire to meditate on this. Our descendants will know better than we what to do. I have in mind a transitional historical period when the Jewish "question" as such, is still acute and demands adequate measures from a world federation of workers' states.

The very same methods of solving the Jewish question which under decaying capitalism will have a utopian and reactionary character (Zionism) will, under the regime of a socialist federation take on real and salutary meaning. This is what I want to point out. How could any Marxist or even any consistent democrat object to this?

1937

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III

Dear Friend: Father Coughlin, who apparently tries to demonstrate that the absolute idealistic moral does not prevent man from being the greatest rascal, has declared over the radio that in the past I received enormous sums of money for the revolution from the Jewish bourgeoisie in the United States. I have already answered in the press that this is false. I did not receive such money, not, of course, because I would have refused financial support for the revolution, but because the Jewish bourgeoisie did not offer this support. The Jewish bourgeoisie remains true to the principle: *not to give*, even now when its head is concerned. Suffocating in its own contradictions, capitalism directs enraged blows against the Jews, moreover a part of these blows fall upon the Jewish bourgeoisie in spite of all its past “service” for capitalism. Measures of a philanthropical nature for refugees become less and less efficacious in comparison with the gigantic dimension of the evil burdening the Jewish people.

Now it is the turn of France. The victory of fascism in this country would signify a vast strengthening of reaction, and a monstrous growth of violent anti-semitism in all the world, above all in the United States. The number of countries which expel the Jews grows without cease. The number of countries able to accept them decreases. At the same time the exacerbation of the struggle intensifies. It is possible to imagine without difficulty what awaits the Jews at the mere outbreak of the future world war. But even without war the next development of world reaction signifies with certainty the *physical extermination of the Jews* .

Palestine appears a tragic mirage, Biro-bidjan a bureaucratic farce. The Kremlin refuses to accept refugees. The “anti-fascist” congresses of old ladies and young careerists do not have the slightest importance. Now more than ever, the fate of the Jewish people—not only their political but also their physical fate—is indissolubly linked with the emancipating struggle of the international proletariat. Only audacious mobilization of the workers against reaction, creation of workers’ militia, direct physical resistance to the fascist gangs, increasing self-confidence, activity and audacity on the part of all the oppressed can provoke a change in the relation of forces, stop the world wave of fascism, and open a new chapter in the history of mankind.

The Fourth International was the first to proclaim the danger of fascism and to indicate the way of salvation. The Fourth International calls upon the Jewish popular masses not to delude themselves but to face openly the menacing reality. Salvation lies only in revolutionary struggle. The “sinews” of revolutionary struggle, as of war, are funds. With the progressive and perspicacious elements of the Jewish people rests the obligation to come to the help of the revolutionary vanguard. Time presses. A day is now equivalent to a month or even to a year. That thou doest, do quickly!

December 22, 1938

The attempt to solve the Jewish question through the migration of Jews to Palestine can now be seen for what it is, a tragic mockery of the Jewish people. Interested in winning the sympathies of the Arabs who are more numerous than the Jews, the British government has sharply altered its policy toward the Jews, and has actually renounced its promise to help them found their “own home” in a foreign land. The future development of military events may well transform Palestine into a bloody trap for several hundred thousand Jews. Never was it so clear as it is today that the salvation of the Jewish people is bound up inseparably with the overthrow of the capitalist system.

July, 1940

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